Can the Green party break Canada's climate gridlock?; With a new green wave sweeping the world, Elizabeth May's party thinks this election may be the chance to make a real difference - Correction Appended

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Correction Appended

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Body

There's a new excitement taking hold within Canada's Green party as it sharpens its bold message with a full slate of candidates eyeing October's federal election.

A polling surge shows upwards of 10 per cent support nationwide and, perhaps more importantly, surveys suggest a substantially higher portion of Canada's restless electorate - dispirited by hyperpartisanship in Ottawa as the global climate crisis becomes undeniable reality - are, for the first time ever, open to voting Green. If not for themselves, for their kids.

Yes, we've all seen this movie before - and it ended with crushing disappointment in 2015, when Elizabeth May's Greens saw support collapse by half in the final week of the campaign. Centre-left voters en masse went with their heads rather than hearts, painting their ballots Justin Trudeau red to ensure the end of Stephen Harper blue.

But ask anyone in Canada's Greens and they will tell you: the momentum is different this time. Trudeau's ruling Liberals are neither new nor nearly so shiny. The Greens, in a series of impressive victories provincially and federally, have used these years to show they can be a winnable choice.

And this time, they believe, there's a genuine chance the October surprise will go the other way: delivering a bloc of Green MPs big enough to play a crucial role in Ottawa, if Canadians voters opt for a minority government.

What the Greens see now is an unprecedented number of Canadian millennials, as they arrive as the most potentially powerful voting cohort, demanding aggressive climate action now - something on the scale of the Green New Deal proposed south of the border by Democratic rising star Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Elizabeth May, for her part, isn't fond of the Depression-era language of the phrase. Canadians hardly need American inspiration - the Greens have spent years honing a basket of economic policies that, May says, "meet and exceed" everything Ocasio-Cortez has described. She's asking Canadians to take a closer look and, unlike 2015, May will be shoulder to shoulder with her rivals in every televised leaders debate to say it loud and clear.

For all the excitement, May is cautious this time around. "I'm not counting any chickens," she told the Star in a recent interview. Yes, she acknowledges, donations are surging. Yes, more people are turning up at Green party events. "Something is happening," is all she will say.

Other party officials told the Star the buzz is driven in part by the Green Wave that rolled dramatically across Europe in late May - a wave that European Union politicos never saw coming.

Green party candidates and their allies, triumphing unexpectedly at the EU ballot box in Brussels, Berlin, Dublin and beyond, now are poised to enter the next European Parliament as potential kingmakers, wielding 69 seats.

One poll last week placed the Greens for the first time ever ahead of all other parties in the birthplace of their movement, Germany, with 27 per cent support, more than Angela Merkel's CDU (26 per cent) and more than twice as strong as the far-right AfD (11 per cent). The Guardian, in sizing up the surprise numbers, called the Green surge a "quiet revolution."

European analysts, struggling to make sense of the unanticipated Green surge, point to social protest movements like the school strikes led by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg and the U.K.'s Extinction Rebellion as drivers.

Dublin's Ciaran Cuffe, who was elected to represent the Greens in Brussels, said the shift coincided with last October's game-changing news from the International Panel on Climate Change, laying out the latest science.

The increased focus on global climate issues "found its way into the public consciousness, and hearts and minds, particularly, of young people," Cuffe told the Guardian.

"Even if they were not voting themselves, they communicated to parents and grandparents. People told me personally in the last few weeks that they were voting Green because their children asked them to. That's something we hadn't seen before."

Canada's Greens are watching closely - and organizing rapidly - hoping to replicate the European surge with a critical mass of seats in Ottawa.

On the climate front, May's party laid its bold ambitions bare last month, unveiling "Mission Possible" - an all-hands-on-deck approach that would strip divisive politics from the climate crisis, empowering an inner cabinet of all parties to guide the country through stringent new emissions targets, including net-zero by 2050.

Canada's Greens say their plan echoes the war cabinets of Mackenzie King and Winston Churchill, when the need for victory transcended partisanship. Such all-party collaboration is appropriate and necessary, May argues, in the face of a threat greater than any war Canada has known.

"It's not a political target; it's a target that science is telling us we can't afford to miss. We have a window in the next 10 years to hold global average temperature rise to 1.5 C and this is what it is going tod take - and if we don't, the window closes permanently," May said.

"So that's why we're rallying around the notion of Mission Possible. It's not Mission Easy. It's not Mission Politically Impossible. We can do this."

The Green platform envisions Canada divesting entirely from Saudi oil imports and depending instead on Newfoundland's offshore output and Alberta bitumen during the rapid transition away from fossil fuels.

As the oilpatch dries up and new technologies come online, the Green's all-hands-on-deck plan also means no hands left behind. Or, in May's words, "no part of Canada is in any way more impacted by the transition than any other part of Canada ... a job guarantee for every worker who wants a job."

What are the chances of anything like this happening? It would take a Green wave large enough to hold the balance of power in a Parliament that returns Trudeau's Liberals to a minority government, in need of partners.

In the Greens' favour, polling suggests that four months out, the party has a degree of momentum that presently eludes its rivals. One Abacus Data snapshot last weekend showed May and her party eclipsing the NDP in many

parts of the country, suggesting a "rapid ascent of the Green party in both vote intent and, more importantly, vote consideration."

Though they now can point to breakthroughs in various parts of Canada, including status as the Official Opposition in P.E.I., a B.C. byelection victory that brought a second MP to sit alongside May in Ottawa and the victory of Mike Schreiner, Ontario's first Green MPP, in Guelph, it's difficult to handicap the political odds this far from election day.

Shachi Kurl, who has been following closely from her post as executive director of the Angus Reid Institute, acknowledges all these differences, but still can't help but wonder whether the Green buzz will carry through to the ballot box.

"We now can say what we couldn't say four years ago: a vote for Green isn't automatically a wasted vote. If you vote with your heart and you vote Green, you might actually get a Green and so that shows a momentum shift, with greater credibility than there was four years ago," Kurl said.

"And that can be a very persuasive argument, particularly at a time when we're seeing in the numbers a real skepticism and jadedness if not outright rejection of the traditional political class.

"Over the years, both at the provincial and federal level, the Greens have often been used by voters as a parking lot by people who say, 'I'm mad at the government of the day or 'I'm mad at the choices in front of me, so I'm going to vote Green,' but then does that carry right into the ballot box?"

Having been burned before by last-minute strategic voting, May is reluctant to translate the best-case scenario into hard numbers. But other Green party officials told the Star a dozen seats or more is an important threshold.

"For me, it's not a number; it's a position," May said. "Are we in a position to ensure Canadians get better, more respectful, evidence-based governance?"

With six parties likely to elect MPs to the next Parliament, May wants potential Green voters to ponder that the chances of a minority government are higher than normal and, if the Green Wave comes true, May's party could, in a best-case Green scenario, find itself positioned to heavily influence that Parliament.

One longtime and rather refreshing Green party mantra is "steal our ideas. We don't care who gets the credit - our only goal is change."

But in the real world - in the way this particular election is shaping up - May is angling for Greens to hold sway from within the House of Commons, pressing for collaboration on aggressive climate action in a context in which Trudeau's Liberals, lacking majority power, will be forced to share governance.

"The model we have in mind in ambition and impact is the Liberal minority Parliament of Lester B. Pearson, when there were 17 New Democrats, including Tommy Douglas and David Lewis," May said.

If a Green wave does materialize, many party officials anticipate it will roll strongest on the coasts. But May and her team also have high hopes in Ontario, pointing to candidates like Mike Morris in Guelph-Centre, a well-known green-economy innovator who has launched a campaign aimed at rising above divisive politics and working together on climate adaptation.

Likewise, in nearby Guelph, Steve Dyck is the Green standard-bearer, aiming to replicate the victory of his provincial counterpart Schreiner at the federal level.

"We are seeing Green momentum throughout the Waterloo region and it is spilling over in a way that has us very excited," said Ian McGugan, who heads the Green party riding association in nearby Dufferin-Caledon.

McGugan acknowledges that Green prospects are a heavier lift in more traditionally conservative Dufferin-Caledon, yet he notes that allegations of voting irregularities recently prompted the federal Conservatives to dismiss their

anointed candidate, Orangeville businessman Harzadan Khattra. With local Conservatives in disarray and with widespread unease over the first year of Premier Doug Ford's version of conservative populist rule, he believes even in Dufferin-Caledon the Green nominee, Stefan Wiesen, has a strong chance.

"We've always been grassroots as a party and proud of it, but at the same time we've evolved," McGugan said.

"I'm not suggesting there's a sudden desire or lust for power in the Green party, because I know that, philosophically, we haven't changed. But in terms of strategy, there is just a much sharper presentation of our ideas and how we intend to deliver them."

Correction

CORRECTION: Mike Morrice is the Green Party candidate running in the federal riding of Kitchener-Centre. A June 10 article about the party misstated his surname. As well, the article misstated the name of the riding he is running in.

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